

Xu Guangqi's rediscovery in the contemporary period

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Abstract

The biography of Xu Guangqi 徐光啓 (1562-1633), an eminent imperial official and leading figure in the history of the cultural relations between East and West in the late Ming period, has been the object of discontinuous attention. The paper offers a review of the main contemporary scholarly works written in the twentieth century, with special attention to that of Monika Übelhör ("Hsü-Kuang-ch'i (1562-1633) und seine Einstellung zum Christentum. Ein Beitrag zur Geistesgeschichte der Späten Ming-Zeit", 1968-69) and more recent ones, tracing the picture of a rediscovery of this important intellectual figure.

要旨

徐光啓 (1562-1633)、著名な皇帝の役人であり、明朝後期における東西文化交流史上の主要人物で、断続的に注目を集める人物の伝記。本稿では、Monika-Übelhör) "Hsü-Kuang-ch'i(1562-1633) und seine Einstellung zum Christentum"に注目し、20世紀に書かれた主要な現代学術研究のレビューを提示する。Ein Beitrag zur Geistesgeschichte der SpätenMing-Zeit "(1968-69) 及びつい最近の著作は、この著名な知識人の功績をたどり再発見へと導く。

Keywords キーワード

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明朝後期

1. Confucian and Catholic

Many studies have been dedicated to Xu Guangqi 徐光启 (1562-1633), an eminent imperial official and leading figure in the history not only of Chinese Catholicism but also of the cultural relations between East and West in the late Ming period, but his biography has been the object of discontinuous attention. His was a complex life which expressed his participation in different cultural and religious universes. To echo F. Damour's phrase, he was a "revealer of unity and relation."

Xu Guangqi, a Confucian literati, politician and high-ranking imperial official, was close to the Jesuit missionaries who operated in China in the last decades of the Ming dynasty. Born in Shanghai, Xu studied in his city for six years at the school of Longhua, then continued his training under the guidance of the master Huang Tiren¹. In 1582, in 1588 and in 1592, he failed the imperial examinations at provincial level and did not become a *juren* (successful candidate in the provincial imperial competitive examination) until 1597. He had his first contacts with Christianity in those very years: in 1595, he met a Jesuit missionary for the first time, the Italian Lazzaro Cattaneo. In 1600, he met Matteo Ricci in Nanking and, three years later, he once again travelled to that city to meet Ricci again but, in his absence, met another Jesuit, João da Rocha. After a brief period of catechism, at forty, he was baptized by da Rocha with the name of Paul (保禄 Baolu). In 1604, he passed the imperial examinations in Beijing, allowing him to take up the title of *jinshi* (successful candidate in the highest imperial civil service examination) and enter the Hanlin academy. The date of his baptism, therefore, was just before his success in the imperial examinations. In the following years, his collaboration with the Jesuits became increasingly intense, until he became a protector of the Society, in particular at some difficult times, such as the persecution of 1616-1617. In the second and third decades of the 17th century, he held various appointments as an official, reaching high levels of responsibility and prestige. One important milestone in Xu's life was in 1629, when the astronomers of the imperial court committed a calculation error about the sun's eclipse. Considering the importance given to the correctness of the calendar and the astronomic calculations for the emperor's legitimacy, Xu Guangqi, who had proposed a reform of the calendar, was put in charge of this reform, on which several Jesuit missionaries collaborated. The following year, in 1630, he was appointed Minister of Rites (*libu shangshu*) and in 1632 Grand Chancellor (*da*

¹ For the chronology of the life of Xu Guangqi, see Ad Dudink, *Xu Guangqi's career: an annotated chronology*, in C. Jami, P. Engelfriet, G. Blue (eds), *Statecraft and Intellectual Renewal in Late Ming China. The Cross-Cultural Synthesis of Xu Guangqi (1562-1633)*, Brill, Leiden/Boston/Köln 2001, pp. 399-409.

xueshi) and Tutor of the heir to the imperial throne. After his death, he was decorated with the title of *taibao* (imperial tutor).

The studies on him concentrate on the last thirty years of his life, from his baptism until his death (1603-1633), because most of the sources available concern this period. However, if his biography as a whole is considered, it is easy to imagine that his cultural interests had already been formed and developed well before he met the Jesuit missionaries. Meeting them, he found some answers, which he considered convincing, to questions that he had matured in an intellectual and spiritual quest nurtured by his study of the classics of Chinese tradition². In this regard, the intuition of Monika Übelhör is important, according to whom, for a Confucian literati, embracing a religion extraneous to the Chinese cultural tradition was equivalent to declaring that the Chinese cultural tradition was not sufficient and had to be “completed”. The late Ming period was a period of institutional weakness that brought with it a certain spiritual restlessness and this greatly stimulated in him the acceptance of a new intellectual heritage. Buddhism and Taoism, according to Xu Guangqi, had failed in leading China to collective well-being and the idea of social harmony. Übelhör has shown how, according to Xu, in Confucianism, unlike in Christianity, the religious element and the binding request for men to be virtuous were missing. In other words, “Xu was in himself certain that the thought of an omniscient God exhorted Christians to goodness. The main usefulness of the teaching represented by the missionaries also lay in this” (Übelhör, II, p. 68).

2. Twentieth century profiles

In the first half of the 20th century, some profiles of Xu Guangqi were published which highlighted traits of his personality which were then resumed and studied in greater depth by subsequent studies. In the first place, the work by the French Jesuit, A. Colombel, which was published in Shanghai in 1900 occupies an important position³. Colombel, who devoted a great deal of space to Xu in his history of the Catholic mission in the region of Jiangnan, reports the extraordinary authority reached by Xu Guangqi in the Society of Jesus: “the knowledge that he had of his own country had great authority for the missionaries and for the superiors of the Society (...) the General Congregation of the Society sent the fathers of the mission to Xu Guangqi to solve their doubts – a great and perhaps unique honour in the history of the Society” (Colombel, pp. 291-292). Colombel's book, published in China in the years of the xenophobic Boxer Rebellion, presents us with

2 M. Übelhör, *Hsü-Kuang-ch'i (1562-1633) und seine Einstellung zum Christentum. Ein Beitrag zur Geistesgeschichte der Späten Ming-Zeit*, in “Oriens Extremus”, 15 (1968), pp. 191-257 (I); 16 (1969), pp. 41-74 (II).

3 Aug. M. Colombel, *Histoire de la Mission du Kiang-nan*, Partie I, Livre II (*Siu-Koang-Ki*), Shanghai 1900, pp. 143-315. This text was translated into Chinese by Zhou Shiliang, *Jiangnan chuanjiaoshi* (江南传教史), Furen daxue chubanshe, Taipei 2009.

a Chinese layman, who elsewhere Colombel defines as a “master who was always loved and listened to by the first fathers of the mission” (Colombel, p. 285), capable of imposing himself by the authoritative position he had reached with the European religious. This emphasis is echoed in the recent study by Roger Hart where the author defines Xu Guangqi as the patron of the Jesuits’. Considering, for example, that in the historical context of late Ming China, Xu defended the Jesuits from attacks that could have cost them exile or execution, it is underlined that Xu had enormous power over the foreign missionaries and, reversing a consolidated perspective, Hart defines the Jesuits as collaborators of Xu Guangqi⁴. The emphasis of Colombel on the authority reached by Xu anticipates, in a certain way, the adoption of an intercultural perspective which has allowed, in more recent years, different scholars to consider and better understand, alongside the influence of Matteo Ricci on Xu Guangqi, the great influence of Xu Guangqi on the Jesuit missionaries and in particular on Ricci; the missionary method he devised and his knowledge of Chinese culture were to a great extent the result of his relationship with Xu Guangqi and with other Chinese converts to Christianity. In this sense, N. Standaert has written original pages that describe a Matteo Ricci “moulded” by his encounter with the “other” and, in the first place, by his relationship with Chinese converts to Christianity⁵.

The subject of the great authority of Xu in the Society of Jesus, proposed by Colombel, was later taken up again and proposed again by Lu Zhengxiang, a Chinese politician and diplomat who then became a Benedictine monk. In 1933, on the third centenary of the death of Xu Guangqi, Lu Zhengxiang wrote a piece in his honour: considering the nationalist spirit that was the backdrop to the composition of this text, the reference to Xu’s authority over the Jesuit missionaries was probably included by Lu as proof of the fact that Chinese Catholics and, in particular, laymen, could and had to play an increasingly active role and take on greater responsibilities in the life of the Church in China (not coincidentally, he defines Xu Guangqi as inspiring the Catholic Action in China)⁶.

In Republican China, Xu Guangqi was also studied and presented as a model due to his patriotism. During the period of the hegemony of the Nationalist party, in the face of the general challenge to find a new modern identity for the country, Xu was above all a patriot who had tried to save the imperial dynasty from the threat of the Manchus and then from foreign domination, using Western science and technology. This type of interpretation tends to ignore the religious dimension, or at least tends to consider it marginal or only functional to achieving a political purpose. As C. Jami, P. Engelfriet and G. Blue have noted, the topic of Xu’s patriotism is often linked to the study of his contribution in the military field, as he had made great efforts to energetically promote

4 R. Hart, *Imagined civilizations. China, the West, and their first encounter*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2013, pp. 8-9.

5 N. Standaert, *Matteo Ricci e la cultura cinese*, in “La Civiltà Cattolica”, 3832 (2010), pp. 319-332.

6 C. Lou Tseng-Tsiang, *Le Tricentenaire du grand Chrétien chinois Paul Siu-Koang-k’i*, in «Le Bulletin des Missions», vol. XIII, n. 3 (1934), pp. 105-118.

the introduction of Western weapons and technologies to defend the Empire from the Manchu invasion. Moreover, as T. Brook underlined, Xu grew up in Shanghai, where the need for military defence from pirates was an everyday event and, from a young age, he had been confronted with the problems linked to military defence⁷.

In the 1930s, some voices of Catholic scholars, in the face of the challenge for the missions to succeed in reinforcing the local Churches and responding to the accusation of Catholicism as a "foreign religion", also preferred the representation of Xu Guangqi as a fervent patriot and as confirmation that there was no contradiction at all between Chinese nationality and Catholic identity⁸.

From the 1940s onwards, the sources started to be used in a more rigorous and critical way and some apologetic, ideological or partial interpretations were rebalanced. For example, the works by P. D'Elia and by J.C. Yang are known⁹. In the following years, summarized references to the figure of Xu Guangqi were found in various works on China: this is the case, for example, of *China. A short cultural history* by C.P. Fitzgerald who underlined the importance of Xu's work in mediating between the Jesuits and the Ming court and of *Science and Civilisation in China* by J. Needham. The latter, in the first volume of his work, mentions the collaboration between Xu Guangqi and Matteo Ricci in the cultural domain and highlights the importance of the scientific works attributed to Xu Guangqi both regarding his contribution to the translations of Western texts and regarding some of his treatises such as the *Nongzheng quanshu* (*Complete treatise on the administration of agriculture*). In the later volumes of the same work by Needham, references to Xu Guangqi are made in many chapters on various scientific subjects: mathematics, geometry, astronomy, chemistry and engineering.

It was not until the study by Monika Übelhör that extensive research was carried out, contextualizing and presenting the biography of Xu Guangqi in detail. Her work entitled *Xu Guangqi (1562-1633) and his understanding of Christianity. A contribution to the history of thought in the late Ming period* contains a level of detail that for many aspects remains unequalled¹⁰. If, as Gregory Blue has written, Übelhör was the pioneer of a generation of Sinologists who considered the figure of Xu Guangqi in particular in the light of striving for good governance, the reflections by this scholar on the figure are highly articulated and

7 T. Brook, *Xu Guangqi in his Context: The World of the Shanghai Gentry*, in C. Jami, P. Engelfriet, G. Blue (eds), *Statecraft and Intellectual Renewal in Late Ming China*, cit., pp. 72-98.

8 C. Lou Tseng-Tsiang, *Le Tricentenaire du grand Chrétien chinois Paul Siu-Koang-k'i*, cit.; H. Bernard-Maitre, *La leçon d'un centenaire (1633-1933): Un précurseur de la Chine moderne. Paul Siu Koang-k'i (zi Kolao)*, *Collectanea commissionis synodalis in Sinis*, 6 (1933), pp. 941-952.

9 *Fonti Ricciane: Documenti originali concernenti Matteo Ricci e la storia delle prime relazioni tra l'Europa e la Cina (1579-1615)*, a cura di P. D'Elia, vol. 2, Libreria dello Stato, Roma 1949 and J.C. Yang, *Hsü Kuang-ch'i*, in A. W. Hummel, *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing period (1644-1912)*, 2 vols., Washington 1943, pp. 316a-319a.

10 M. Übelhör, *Hsü-Kuang-ch'i (1562-1633) und seine Einstellung zum Christentum. Ein Beitrag zur Geistesgeschichte der Späten Ming-Zeit*, in "Oriens Extremus", 15 (1968), pp. 191-257 (I); 16 (1969), pp. 41-74 (II).

go well beyond this perspective. Published only in German in the late 1960s, this study had a limited circulation. The author provides a detailed biography of Xu Guangqi which, as well as covering the stages in his political career, his studies and his relationship with missionaries, provides many elements about his family context, illustrating for example how Xu's wide interests come in the first place from the influence of his parents. Xu Guangqi – as Übelhör explains – came from a family that had known changing fortunes. His great-great-grandfather belonged to the class of literati, but his great-grandfather had encountered economic difficulties which did not allow him to dedicate himself to a career as an official and instead he devoted himself to farming. Xu's family history was considered an enlightening example of the phenomenon of social mobility of the Ming period. "His direct ancestors were farmers and tradesmen who, although they did not belong to the cultivated class, followed political events with great interest and attention" (Übelhör, I, p. 219).

Übelhör's work also includes a detailed analysis of the political and economic context in which Xu Guangqi's personal story takes place. However, it is above all the pages on the history of thought in the late Ming period that provide original pointers to understand our figure, where this period is defined as a time of spiritual restlessness and the main features of the crisis of Confucianism are outlined. Facing up to this crisis set a challenge which absorbed great effort by the literati of the time. The author, giving various examples taken from the scholarly works of the time, insists on the fact that, in the late Ming period, the intellectuals shifted their interest towards concrete studies (*Shixue*). Many of the studies by Xu Guangqi are to be contextualized in this movement according to which the objective of guaranteeing fruitful social co-existence in the empire could be reinforced thanks to the commitment of men of culture to practical questions. It was necessary to relaunch, so to speak, a Confucianism finalized to what appeared useful for the State, and not concentrate solely on reflecting on the classics and self-perfection. The author points out how, although in the past the Jesuits had been believed to have rekindled in China an interest in sciences and technology, Xu Guangqi dealt with these questions on his own initiative even before he met the missionaries. He was also the one who convinced the missionaries to translate Western books of practical use (Übelhör, II, pp. 69-70). For Xu Guangqi, scientific knowledge was not something that was an end in itself or abstract, but it had a deep moral foundation; in short, knowledge appeared to him as an instrument that had to find a practical application within an overall project to build up collective interest and protect the social order. For example in the field of agriculture, the experiments that Xu Guangqi carried out on the introduction of new plantations to fight famines and hunger or the studies on the journeys of locusts to prevent damage to crops are to be contextualized in his overall project of good governance for the benefit of the people. From the very start, this is a non-materialistic vision of the world and science but which put a moral purpose at the centre and, as such, was in harmony with the vision of the Jesuit missionaries¹¹.

¹¹ F. Bray and G. Métailié, *Who was the Author of the Nongzhen Quanshu?*, in C. Jami, P. Engelfriet, G. Blue (eds.), *Statecraft and Intellectual Renewal in Late Ming China*, cit., p. 358.

Übelhör then analyses some political works by Xu which reflect his positions both on domestic and foreign policy. As far as the former is concerned, the crucial topic around which his thought revolved was the need for the recovery of the economic situation of the empire. The presuppositions for the well-being of a country are outlined, the wealth of which comes, according to Xu, in the first place from agriculture. On this point he referred to the thought of Sima Qian, the famous historian of the Han period, considered the father of Chinese historiography. Some of the topics studied by Xu in this perspective concern the control of water, the reform of the tax system but also the fight against corruption and waste, in particular that deriving from the privileges enjoyed by the members of the imperial family. "He interprets the idea," writes Übelhör, "that nobody must fear entering history as an official who has brought about innovation. In this he shows a considerable unorthodox attitude with respect to the typical conservatism of Chinese bureaucracy." (Übelhör, I, p. 245)

As far as foreign policy, on the other hand, is concerned, Xu's observations are above all on the effort to reinforce the country from the military point of view, with a specific concern for the border territories in the north of the country, threatened by the Manchus. Xu insists on the need to develop military technology and advocates the cause of introducing cannons on the Western model into China and the creation of a modern army. In his opinion, to fend off any external threat and guarantee stability for the empire, "China must not rely solely on its cultural superiority compared to the peoples along its borders, but become reinforced from the economic and military points of view" (Übelhör, I, p. 256). "In his political writings, Übelhör continues, Xu Guangqi was very critical of the lack of objectivity and the inertia of his contemporaries. He also criticized their inclination for magic and superstition. He found Western doctrine the ideal means to extirpate this evil from the world. The Christian religion not only filled the void present in Confucianism. As the first Jesuits – according to the spirit of the Renaissance – presented Christianity as a doctrine guided by reason in its essence, they satisfied his request for thought guided by reason" (Übelhör, II, p. 70).

The German scholar then explains how it was religion and not the science and technology brought by the missionaries that Xu Guangqi considered the most important part of their teaching. If anything, the clarity of the scientific demonstrations that Western natural sciences provided, was for him evidence or a hint of the fact that their statements on man and on God could also equally be considered as valid. In other words, Western sciences would have provided many signs of the correctness of Western thought in relation to all questions. As studies including those by Chen Mingsheng¹² then showed, Xu Guangqi accepted that the idealized accounts by the missionaries about the situation of Europe were convincing, exactly like their scientific theories. There was therefore a

¹² Chen Min-sun, *Hsü Kuang-ch'i (1562-1633) and his image of Europe*, in Id., *Mythistory in sino-Western contacts: Jesuit missionaries and the pillars of Chinese Catholic religion*, Lakehead University Printing Services, 2003, pp. 15-30.

clear over-estimation of the West, which was also the result of the absence of any direct knowledge. According to Xu, the Western sciences were able to explain the phenomonic world with rigorous rationality: they not only stated laws but proved their correctness. In this perspective, Xu considered mathematics the fundamental science: the basis and instrument of all practical sciences, mathematics was believed to be the main instrument to intensify and discipline reason using the universal language of numbers.

If it is true, as has been pointed out on several occasions, that Xu expressed a strong emphasis on what could be useful for the State and for the people¹³, Übelhör's interpretation goes beyond the idea that he considered Christianity only in its perspective of political usefulness. She underlines how Xu was in tune with the choice of Ricci to refer to an "authentic" Confucianism to support his theories. "The trends of the Renaissance emerge in the tolerance that the Jesuits of that time showed towards the fundamental truths of Confucianism, in their building on reason, in their reference to ideals that were accomplished in an earlier period, perceived as classic [...] Confucianism in its present form had moved away from its starting point, modified by subsequent versions" (Übelhör, II, p. 69). "It is surprising," Übelhör concludes, "how, in the face of the question of a creator God, he did not deem it necessary, like Ricci, to indicate ideas with a similar meaning, possibly present in the original Confucianism. Rather, he accepted the idea of God as something new and plausible of his own".

As far as the studies on Xu in China are concerned, from the beginning of the twentieth century, when literati such as Liang Qichao praised the modernity of Xu Guangqi, there have been numerous academic publications and texts of vulgarization about him. The panorama of the research in the contemporary period is rich and lively, in particular with reference to the most recent period¹⁴. The various editions of Xu's works, published in China in the 20th century and in particular *Xu Guangqi ji* edited by Wang Zhongmin, published in Shanghai by Guji chubanshe in 1963 and then, in a revised and corrected edition in 1984, must also be recalled.

Recent studies

As noted by Jami, Engelfriet and Blue, the representations of Xu Guangqi have always been inspired by ideological points of view. The image of him proposed by his contemporaries, the Jesuits, inclined to present him as confirmation of the validity of their missionary method, is an example of this. Many nineteenth- and twentieth-century

¹³ J. Gernet, *A note on the Context of Xu Guangqi's Conversion*, in C. Jami, P. Engelfriet, G. Blue (editors), *Statecraft and Intellectual Renewal in Late Ming China*, cit., pp. 186-190.

¹⁴ See Liu Guopeng, *Sintesi degli studi cinesi su Xu Guangqi nel XX e XXI secolo*, in E. Giunipero (ed.), *Un cristiano alla corte dei Ming. Xu Guangqi e il dialogo interculturale tra Cina e Occidente*, Guerini e Associati, Milano 2013, pp. 257-287. Amongst the biographical profiles in Chinese, see inter alia Fang Hao, *Tianzhujiao renwu zhuan* (1967), [vol. 1], pp.

interpretations have also been marked by particular perspectives. In China, for example, in 1962, as recalled by Gregory Blue, the Vice President of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Zhu Kezhen, in commemorating the 400th anniversary of the birth of Xu Guangqi, sang convinced praises of him, remembering him as a mathematician, an astronomer, a politician and a patriot but without mentioning his Catholic identity. It is only recently that in China some cultural initiatives, organized in recent years in Shanghai by the local administration, have brought back to public attention the figure of Xu Guangqi without overlooking the aspects linked to his religious faith. In 2003, 400 years after the baptism of this illustrious Shanghai citizen, the district of Xuhui, in Shanghai, restored the burial place of Xu Guangqi, relocating the original cross and copies or remains of the inscriptions that decorated this place and which refer to his conversion to Catholicism in the public garden dedicated to his memory.

In this sense, pioneering work has been done in China by Wang Xiaochao who, in his book *Christianity and Imperial Culture*, originally published in Beijing in 1997 and the following year in English by Brill, presents and translates into English the so-called "Christian texts" of Xu Guangqi. Although the texts translated by Wang raise multiple problems of attribution, as emerges from the studies by Ad Dudink¹⁵, Wang Xiaochao's text tends to re-evaluate and reconsider the Catholic identity of Xu Guangqi. In recent years, it has been above all the works and the positions of Li Tiangang that support the idea that in today's China it is necessary to correct the previous ideological reading and to proceed, in the respect of historical truth, with what is defined a "policy of admission", recognizing the religious inspiration of Xu Guangqi. Li Tiangang, editor of the 2010 complete edition in ten volumes of the works by Xu Guangqi¹⁶, notes that in the schoolbooks for primary and middle schools in the People's Republic, "Xu is recognized as a 'scientist', 'patriotic politician' but, deliberately or not, his 'Catholic identity' is passed under silence [...] This type of 'lack of admission' has caused a complete distortion of the identity of Xu Guangqi, resulting in the incapacity to really interpret history." He has also underlined how Xu Guangqi was "sure of himself in dialogue with the Westerners and had begun his studies spontaneously, passing on his knowledge enthusiastically, just as he was pervaded by an active religious feeling," living a plural identity harmoniously and without conflict.

Various studies have investigated the reasons why Xu Guangqi and other Chinese literati embrace the Christian faith. Peterson, in a 1982 essay entitled *Why did they become Christians? Yang Tingyun, Li Zhizhao and Xu Guangqi*, briefly analyzed the personal paths towards baptism of the persons defined the "three pillars" of the Catholic Church in China. He places alongside Xu two other well-known figures of eminent Chinese who were his contemporaries and who converted to Christianity in the early 17th century.

¹⁵ Ad Dudink, *The image of Xu Guangqi as author of Christian texts (A bibliographical appraisal)*, in Jami-Engelfriet-Blue (eds.), *Statecraft and Intellectual Renewal in Late Ming China*, cit., pp. 99-152.

¹⁶ Zhu Weizheng and Li Tiangang (eds.), *Xu Guangqi quanji 徐光啟全集*, 10 voll., Shanghai guji chubanshe, Shanghai 2010.

Whilst considering the diversity of their experiences, Peterson concludes that all three found in Christianity a moral discipline which flowed from a divine and universal source that could reinforce the values of the Chinese tradition which by then had been eroded. As far as Xu Guangqi in particular is concerned, Peterson dwelled on the coincidence between his baptism and his success in the imperial examinations: although this could suggest that he had acquired a certain confidence from the teachings of the missionaries, basically the decisive push towards conversion did not come for Xu from either science or his meeting with Ricci. It was his discovery of the “doctrine of the Lord of Heaven” which was decisive, based not on oneself or one’s thought but on a reality that was external to man and universal, summed up by the word *Tian*, Heaven¹⁷. On the same line, Erik Zürcher describes Xu Guangqi’s creed as “Tianzhu-ism” or “Confucian monotheism”, arguing that “it is almost exclusively focused upon the belief in a single, all-powerful Creator God, the controller of human destiny in life, and the stern judge in the hereafter. The whole complex of Rebirth and Redemption is hardly ever touched upon.”¹⁸

Standaert, on the other hand, applied to the case of Xu’s conversion an approach drawn from studies of the sociology of religion to highlight the complexity and the dynamism of the different dimensions of each process of religious conversion, defining the conversion of Xu Guangqi to Catholicism as an “intellectual conversion”¹⁹.

Amongst the writings dedicated to Xu Guangqi which have appeared in China, the pastoral letter by the bishop of Shanghai, the Jesuit Mgr. Aloysius Jin Luxian (1916-2013) occupies a very particular place. This text, albeit without any academic intentions, provides interesting ideas on the life of Xu Guangqi and in particular recalls one of his many profiles – often overlooked by scholars – when he speaks of him as a founder of the Catholic diocese of Shanghai and the forefather of a family which for many generations after Xu Guangqi made a considerable contribution to the development of the Shanghai Church.

Once again, on the decision of Xu to become a Christian, an original emphasis comes from a brief essay by Matteo Nicolini-Zani in which it is recalled that the Jesuit missionaries intended to present Christianity as a religion that had been rooted in China for centuries²⁰. The discovery, in 1623, of the Christian stele of Xi’an, dating back to the 8th century, provides an exceptional opportunity to increase the respect and authority of a Christianity which could claim such a long presence in China. The reference that Xu Guangqi makes to the tradition of Syro-Oriental Christianity of the Tang period (618-907), which takes the name of “luminous teaching” (*jingjiao*) must be read in this perspective.

17 W. Peterson, *Why did they become Christians? Yang T’ing-yün, Li Chih-tsao, and Hsü Kuang-ch’i*, (1982)

18 E. Zürcher, *Xu Guangqi and Buddhism*, in Jami- Engelfriet-Blue (eds.), *Statecraft and Intellectual Renewal in Late Ming China*, cit., p. 162.

19 N. Standaert, *Xu Guangqi’s Conversion as a Multifaceted Process*, *ivi*, pp. 170-185.

20 M. Nicolini-Zani, *Xu Guangqi, discepolo dell’insegnamento luminoso*, in E. Giunipero (ed.), *Un cristiano alla corte dei Ming*, cit., pp. 125-142.

Matteo Nicolini-Zani explains the reasons of what he defines “Jesuit appropriation” of Tang Christianity and illustrates the motives why Xu defined himself in his writings as a “disciple of the luminous teaching”. The clear apologetic aim of this juxtaposition between Syro-Oriental Christianity of the Tang period and the Catholic Christianity of the late Ming period is testimony of the harmony between Xu Guangqi and the Jesuit missionaries of his time. The fact that Xu defines himself as a disciple of the luminous teaching in two texts the attribution of which has never been questioned, is a sign of his having embraced Christianity and forms an element, along with many others, to be considered, in the face of the doubts put forward by Roger Hart who has recently questioned whether Xu Guangqi was in fact a Christian. He writes, for example, “we should not assume that Xu was a Christian: there is little if any evidence that Xu believed in the central doctrines of Christianity—salvation through Jesus Christ, his sacrifice on the cross, and his resurrection” (Hart, p. 9). This argumentation, together with other very challenging ones in the interesting and provocative book by Hart, appears questionable especially due to the fact that, in the Catholic spiritual sensibility of the period, centrality was given not to the mystery of salvation through Jesus Christ, his sacrifice on the cross, and his resurrection but the religiousness taken to China by the Jesuits at the end of the 16th and in the 17th centuries was based rather on the Commandments and on the moral teachings to observe in order to avoid divine punishment and hell. It is interesting in this regard that the five tetrasyllabic poems with a Christian subject written by Xu Guangqi have as their subjects the Ten Commandments, the Seven Virtues Overcoming Sin, the Eight Beatitudes and the Fourteen Works of Mercy, taken from the catechism *Tianzhu jiaoyao* 天主教要²¹. Lastly, some studies in the volume *Un cristiano alla corte dei Ming*, mentioned above, converge in considering that Xu Guangqi was helped by meeting the Jesuit missionaries and by his embracing Christianity to express that original cross-cultural synthesis that is appealing to anyone who becomes aware of his personal story.

21 The five poems are part of the collection 聖教規誠箴讚 (*Shengjiao guijie zhenzan*) or 規誠箴贊 (*Guijie zhenzan*). On these texts Ad Dudink writes: “The first (untitled) poem starts with *wei huang* 維皇 and ends with *de xin* 德馨. After this eulogy on the Christian teachings there follow in *Shengjiao guijie zhenzan* four eulogies on: the Ten Commandments (*Tianzhu shijie* 天主十誡 or 十誡箴贊 *Shijie zhenzan*), the Seven Virtues overcoming Sin (*Kezui qide* 克罪七德 or 克罪七德箴贊 *Kezui qide zhenzan*) (1604), the Eight Beatitudes (*Zhenfu baduan* 真福八端 or 真福八端箴贊 *Zhenfu baduan zhenzan*) and the Fourteen Works of Mercy (*Aijin shisiduan* 哀矜十四端 or 哀矜十四端箴贊 *Aijin shisiduan zhenzan*).” Ad Dudink, *The image of Xu Guangqi as author of Christian texts*, cit., pp.